

Washington - Congresswoman Linda Sánchez delivered the following remarks today at a press conference with other Members of Congress and human rights advocates. Congresswoman Sánchez, a Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the House Committee on Education and Labor, recently returned from Colombia, where she met with political leaders and workers.

"I just returned from a trip to Colombia. This was my second trip to Colombia in the last 7 months.

"Colombia is a wonderful country with great people, a vibrant culture and a growing economy. It is clear that Colombia has made great progress in rising above the dark period of violence that gripped the country for too long.

"I would like to see our two countries strengthen our relationship. This is why I am committed to a new and better trade model that will actually help working families in both countries.

"We all know that the Bush-Colombia Free Trade Agreement is not going to do that.

"The proposed Free Trade Agreement is built on the same failed framework as the NAFTA. Despite negotiations between the Bush Administration and Congress, this FTA still has too many of the same poisonous NAFTA provisions.

"We have seen the failures of the NAFTA model over the last decade. The truth is that the FTA model is designed to favor the wealthiest few and corporate bottom line — at the expense of workers.

"NAFTA has shown that we need demonstrated proof that worker protections are being enforced.

"While the Colombian government has made progress on national safety, there are still significant concerns about human rights abuses targeting worker advocates. These concerns have increased with reports that government resources may have been used to help paramilitary groups target labor activists.

"The safety of Colombian workers is too important to risk. We need to see results.

"I am also concerned that the FTA will gut Colombia's legitimate agricultural industry. Colombian farmers will be forced to compete with subsidized crops in the United States. Many farmers will be forced to choose between leaving their farms for crowded factories or growing lucrative drug crops.

"Since President Bush is not interested in changing this or other failed policies, I'd like to see President Uribe take the lead on a better trade agreement.

"President Uribe should prove — not just declare -- his commitment to lowering the rate of

violence against worker advocates. This would include meeting certain benchmarks BEFORE any agreement would come into effect, including fewer reports of physical assault or threats against labor organizers, and increased prosecution of offenders over at least a two-year period.

"This would also require a full and open investigation into reports that government intelligence services helped paramilitary groups target labor organizers for assault.

"President Uribe has declared his support for U.S.-funded drug eradication programs in Colombia. He should agree to a provision that would nullify the trade agreement if drug cultivation in Colombia rises to hit certain trigger marks, while we agree to improve our efforts to reduce American demand for drugs.

"Finally, President Uribe needs to declare his support for re-opening the negotiated agreement to incorporate these and other protections into the actual agreement. No more unenforceable, lip-service side agreements!

"The Colombian people deserve better than this bad trade deal, and so do American working families.

"If our President won't stand up for them, I hope that President Uribe will."